focus:

# Refugees

**UNHCR**

United Nations
High Commissioner
for Refugees

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**Cover:** Refugees from Georgia at a collective center at Kachnoye, North Ossetia, Russian Federation.

Photo: UNHCR / T. Boustani

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The massive return of Rwandan refugees from the Goma area began on 15 November. Over a five-day period, more than 500,000 refugees streamed back to Rwanda.

# Rwanda: Finding a way home

"I was living in Kibumba camp. We set off for Rwanda after disturbances had broken out in the camp. Unfortunately, unidentified people fired at our group and forced us to make our way to Mugunga camp. Before we arrived there we tried unsuccessfully to reach some UNHCR vehicles but, once again, unidentified people shot at our group. So we continued west to Nyamirambo on the road to Sake. We spent two weeks in Sake without receiving food and nothing moved until now."

For Védaste Nsengiyumva, a Rwandan refugee from Gitarama Prefecture, "now" meant the massive return of Rwandan refugees from the Goma area that began on 15 November. Over a five-day period more than 500,000 refugees streamed back through the border crossings they had used to leave Rwanda in 1994, evoking the same images of over- ▶

## "Too long away from home"

Mans Nyberg

On an early December morning in the Departure Center of the enormous Benaco camp, in Tanzania, people are queuing up for repatriation. Those who have made up their mind to return to Rwanda are requested to register the day before their departure. During the last week, the number of registrations has gone up sharply, from 100-200 a day to over 1,000. Most of these refugees have spent almost two and a half years in the camps. There has been no apparent wish to repatriate to Rwanda. Now, mainly because of the successful return of over a half a million refugees from eastern Zaire, the mood in the Ngara camps is changing.

"Now it is safe to return," said Hadija Nbagwile, 19, a young widow with a small infant child. She has no relatives in the camp, but when she fled her home in Kigarama, a sister stayed behind. She has no news of her fate. She does not know if the house of her late husband is still standing, or if it is occupied by other people, but she has decided to return anyway. "It is better to go back than to remain here as a refugee," she says. She already has plans for the future: she wants to start a small business, open a shop in her village — "if I get the capital for it," she adds with a shy smile.

Marilene Mbarushimana, 39, a peasant's wife with five children, is very determined to return to her home in Kibungo. She would have left long ago, but she has been ill, and the doctor advised against it. Now she is well and ready to return, regardless of the situation. She does not know if her house is still standing or if her relatives are alive, but even if she had that information it would not change her decision to return. "We are living in difficult conditions here; in Rwanda we had our own house, we had our own things. We have been too long away from home, doing nothing."

When the conflict broke out in Rwanda two years ago, Straton Sakindi was a student in the 6th grade in the secondary school of Nyabitare. In the camp he has worked for the YMCA. He speaks good English. His ambition is to return to Nyabitare, get a job and finish his studies. He is better informed about the situation back home than most people, since his uncle stayed behind and has sent him letters through the Red Cross. The 25-year-old Sakindi knows that his house is undamaged, but that it is now occupied by strangers, and he worries about how to get it back. "Anyway, it is better to return to my home country, because here in the camp there are many problems — no schools for example. Life here has no future." Straton's parents and his nine younger brothers and sisters will stay in the camp for the time being. His father has decided to wait until Straton sends him a letter from home telling him that it is OK to return.

Evarist Ntagara, 25, is a farmer from Murambi. He is married, with one child. He has decided to repatriate because he knows that those who have returned have had no problems. He has had contacts with people who have returned to his home village. They all tell him that everything is fine. "Now a lot of people are planning to repatriate, which is good, because it is better to go in a great number. There is no need for us to stay here any longer." Evarist says that he is not afraid, he was not involved in killings, he has a good conscience. Even if the government has changed, he wants to return home to continue being a farmer. He adds that those things which are necessary for a good life cannot be found in a refugee camp, they can be found only at home.

A group of four men from Rusumo, just across the border from Ngara, are standing outside the registration office. They say that they have decided to return because most people are talking about repatriating. The news from Rwanda has been encouraging: "Since nothing happened to those who returned from Goma, why should we be afraid of returning?" Also, UNHCR has brought back returnees to the camp to give information about the situation back home. However, there are still intimidators in the camps telling people that they should stay and that they will get into trouble if they return. One of the men, Jean De Dieu, explains: "Some people have committed genocide and they are discouraging others from leaving. Those are the young militiamen who are assistants to the commune leaders. They will not repatriate, they will resist to the end."

Immediately afterwards, we had a chance to see the intimidators in action. Outside the Departure Center, the inevitable crowd of idle onlookers are standing. When we go out, some of the men standing there start a discussion with us. A middle-aged man of some authority takes the lead and acts as the spokesman of the group. In excellent French, he explains that he is not ready to return, because he has heard of so many problems for the returnees: they have been denied their property rights, people have disappeared, there are even reports of massacres. "When people return to their villages in the hills and are out of sight of the international community and the media — then the Tutsis kill them!" The bystanders nod in agreement. We realize that we have been witnessing the intimidators at work, conducting their whispering campaign in the camps, with the aim of persuading as many refugees as possible to remain. They still need the innocent refugees as a power base and a shield against retribution and justice. ●

▶ whelming numbers and endless columns of people laboring under the weight of whatever belongings they could carry.

Like hundreds of thousands of others in Goma, Bukavu and Uvira, Védaste's trek began after a rebellion broke out in eastern Zaire and forced the refugees from their camps or to seek food and shelter elsewhere. In the Goma area, however, most Rwandans had remained close to the border so that they were able to take advantage of a break in the fighting and repatriate almost as one.

"I left Kahindo camp nine days ago because of fighting and went into hiding in a nearby forest. We spent five days there and we narrowly missed starving to death. Afterwards we passed through the forest and arrived at Sake, where fighting broke out again. Therefore we decided to come back to Rwanda," recounted François Muvyekure when he reached Gisenyi.

"We had to find a way home and we did," said Faustin Dangari, who returned to Gisenyi on 16 November when arrivals were estimated at 12,000 an hour. "The Zairian combatants let us through but we had inquired before whether the first group of refugees had gone through safely on Friday evening and it was confirmed that they had. Then we prepared to follow," he added.

Despite the low level of repatriation in the preceding months — due to inertia, willful distortions of reality in Rwanda, or simple apprehension when contemplating a return — the returnees seemed relieved their exile was over. Many voiced their frustration at the disinformation and pressures directed at ordinary refugees that continued even at the height of the conflict. Once in Gisenyi, Védaste said "people who were not following the soldiers or militia decided to come back home. Concerning rumors, we shut our ears to them because we were fed up. No one could fear to go back home."

François concurred: "We have been told that Rwanda is insecure, but we find it peaceful. In any case we are all safe."

By 22 November, the first groups began arriving in Kigali, some 180 kms from the border with Zaire. Along the way, the majority had branched off the main road, heading into their home communes in the northwestern prefectures most represented in the Goma camps — Gisenyi, Ruhengeri, Byumba and Rural Kigali. In the communes, the priority immediately became the reg-

istration and reintegration of the returnees who had bypassed transit centers where they would normally have received food rations and material assistance. The UNHCR "return packages," comprising plastic sheeting, blankets, jerrycans, kitchen utensils, as well as an allotment of seeds and hoes per family, would therefore have to be distributed in almost every village once the newcomers were counted and identified.

UNHCR hired two clerks in each commune to work with local authorities registering the influx, and with NGOs began organizing temporary shelter and reception centers in the majority of communes. The lists are to form the basis of distributions of the return packages by UNHCR as well as the several months' food rations by the World Food Program.

Given the large number of farmers among the returning refugees, whose hope, like François' "is to go back home and cultivate my land," the provision of seeds and tools is essential. About 150,000 hoes were ordered to increase existing stocks and bean seeds, normally provided by the European Union, will be supplemented by allocations of vegetable seeds by UNHCR. With the ability to move back into one's house, the possibility of becoming self-sufficient or generate income from the production of food has been identified as the most important element of a successful repatriation in Rwanda.

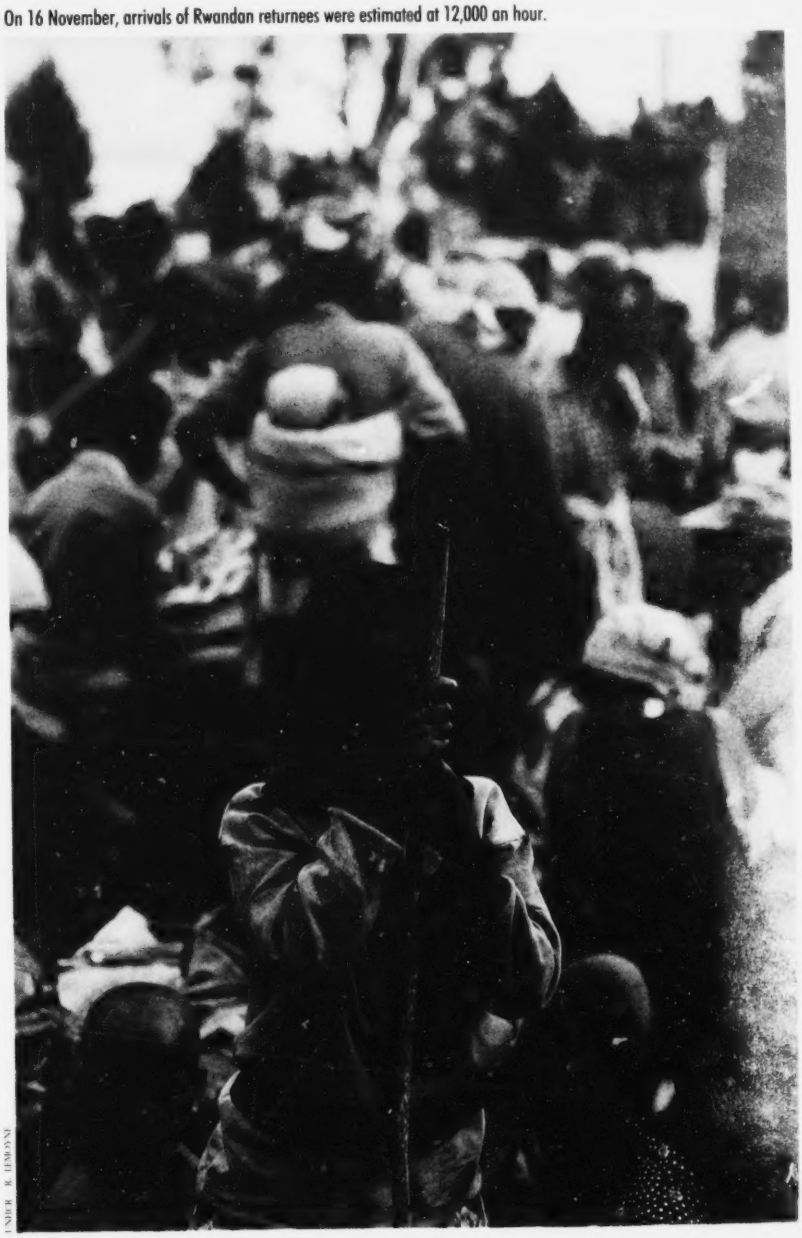
Based on surveys carried out in the past, it is expected that a certain number of returning refugees — perhaps six or seven percent — will not be able to reoccupy their houses immediately. Some were damaged or destroyed during the war in 1994 while others have been occupied by individuals or families who took advantage of the available shelter in the absence of the owners.

Three weeks after the influx began, monitors from UNHCR and the Human Rights Field Operation in Rwanda reported that most property problems were being settled amicably and by informal arrangements between occupants and newly arrived returnees. The government of Rwanda shortened delays given to the occupants, announcing that they had 15 days to return houses to their rightful owners.

Many returning refugees have already recovered their homes under similar circumstances: Cecile Nyinawintwali, who was visited by UNHCR staff after her repatriation from Burundi in August, had to move in with friends when she arrived in the Rwandan capital, where available housing is in short supply. Three months later she lives in one of the adjoining properties she owns in the Nyamirambo section of Kigali while making repairs to the other in order to rent it.

"UNHCR has originated the shelter program because you cannot expect reconciliation from people who have no homes," states UNHCR Representative W. Roman Urasa. Since 1994, UNHCR has made the issue of housing a priority, acquiring 77,000 "kits" for construction projects in ev- ▶

On 16 November, arrivals of Rwandan returnees were estimated at 12,000 an hour.



UNHCR R. LEMOYNE

▶ ery prefecture in Rwanda. Urasa continues: "We are involved not simply because shelter represents a basic right but because the issues of property and poverty have been root causes of the conflict in Rwanda."

Recipients are identified from among returnees, as well as from other groups of vulnerable individuals such as single heads of households or survivors of the genocide, and supply the labor themselves, usually forming associations while benefiting from the technical advice of an NGO. The kits include corrugated metal sheeting, wood, nails, hardware, doors and windows, and material for brickmaking.

To date 15,000 houses are either completed or under construction, some standing alone, others part of planned settlement villages on land made available by the government. The acceleration of the shelter program will be one of the keys to alleviating the housing shortage, potentially one of the greatest obstacles to the process of reintegration.

In addition to material assistance, UNHCR has redoubled its monitoring activities in order to ensure that the problems returnees face do not go unreported. At least 26 protection officers are involved in general monitoring, follow-up of security cases and registration. As in August of this year after the large returns from Burundi, UNHCR will work with local authorities on common difficulties observed as returnees restart their lives in Rwanda, paying particular attention to areas with higher than average detention rates or litigation involving land or homes.

The reception given to the returnees has so far received good marks from UNHCR protection staff. "From an estimated 24,000 new arrivals to the three communes in Kigali ville only around 100 are still in transit centers; others who may not be able to move into their houses now have been taken in by family or friends," reported UNHCR's Gottfried Koefner during the second week of December, "and with NGO partners we've carried out non-food distributions in most of the city's 19 sectors." The Human Rights Field Operation in Rwanda had recorded 5,460 arrests among returnees from Zaire and Tanzania by 31 December 1996. Many of these returnees had given themselves up for their own protection after local people identified them as having been involved in killings in 1994.

In addition to material assistance, UNHCR has redoubled its monitoring activities in order to ensure that the problems returnees face do not go unreported.

Protection issues will continue to be major concerns and UNHCR will push projects aimed at strengthening the country's justice system with an emphasis on basic civics. Among programs started two years ago are workshops and projects organized through the ministries for youth and women, where UNHCR has tried to promote a message of cooperation and justice.

"In this context it is not bricks we are counting," says Urasa, "the point is for the youth to work together and help the population, and for women to come together and look at problems as women, especially as many of them are heads of households."

In Tanzania, meanwhile, UNHCR and the government issued a joint message on 6 December to the Rwandan refugees in that country. It stated in part that "on the basis of the repatriation from Goma, the Government of the United Republic of Tanzania has decided that all Rwandan refugees in Tanzania are expected to return home by 31 December 1996." The message was translated into Kinyarwanda and broadcast by a local radio station as well as in the camps with megaphones.

Already, news of the return from Zaire had reached the 530,000 refugees in the Ngara and Karagwe camps where there had been an increase in the number of candidates registering for repatriation.

Armed with lessons learned from the five days in November when the road from Ruhengeri to Gisenyi was impassably thick with returnees, UNHCR began preparations for repatriation on a similar scale from Rwanda's eastern border. Water points were set up between the largest concentration of refugees in Ngara — the Benaco camps — and the Rusumo crossing point as well as at five kilometer intervals from there to Kagitumba, on the border between Rwanda and Uganda to the north, for a total of 42 sites. The almost 150 additional trucks brought to Rwanda since the influx from Zaire were readied to support the available fleet in Tanzania and the staff of Sub-Office Ngara began the registration of vulnerable cases in order to assist them in the event of a large-scale repatriation movement.

Since November, some 1.3 million Rwandans had returned to their country, including 483,500 from Tanzania and 719,000 from eastern Zaire. These numbers vastly surpassed any return figures since UNHCR began promoting voluntary repatriation at the start of 1995. Admittedly, large numbers of Rwandan refugees swept out of the camps in Tanzania and headed for the bush to avoid repatriation. But Tanzanian troops were deployed to stop the exodus and directed the refugees toward the Rwandan border.

Since then, almost all the Rwandan refugees in Tanzania have returned home.

**Paul Stromberg**

# M'Berra: A victim of its success

The pilot said we were directly above M'Berra camp. I looked out, expecting a field of blue-capped tents to rise suddenly and dramatically out of the Sahara. I saw only an arid expanse of brown, shimmering in the heat-haze.

The pilot maneuvered the plane through a few slow circles, but it wasn't much help. I could barely tell where the desert ended and the camp began. I wasn't worried, though. M'Berra and I would get to know each other.

At the time of my visit in October, at the beginning of the dry season, there were just under 28,000 refugees living in this remote corner of Mauritania. They were primarily Malians, of Tuareg and Moor origin, who had fled the fighting that erupted in Mali and Niger in the early 1990s. Tuareg groups, "armed bandits" as they were called officially, had mounted attacks against convoys in the north of Mali. To escape the violence and repression that ensued, thousands of Malians went to neighboring countries.

There are still 100,000 Malian refugees in four countries: 28,000 in Mauritania, 25,000 in Burkina Faso, 20,500 in Niger and 15,500 in Algeria. But now that peace has returned, the refugees are heading back to Mali.

I had come to M'Berra camp to prepare a documentary on refugees.

Journalists usually do well to shy away from stories with happy endings, especially when there is so much unhappiness to report from Africa. But this was one story that promised to end happily, and I found myself looking forward to telling it. More refugees are going home every day. M'Berra camp may be ▶

In a remote corner of Mauritania lies M'Berra camp.

October 1996:
After many years in exile, the Malian refugees finally return home. Here a group of returnnes from Mauritania arrives in Tinteloute village, Timbuktu region, Mali.

Back in their country, the Malian returnees are taken to a transit center in Aratene.

▶closed by the time you read this, a victim of its own success.

Since June 1995 more than 14,000 of the refugees who had fled to M'Berra had returned to Mali. The combatants who had turned the north of the country into a war zone now seemed serious about keeping the peace.

They came together in Timbuktu, on 27 March 1996, and threw their weapons onto a bonfire that lit up the night. The message was clear. For all the questions that remained about Mali's future, about the country's ability to pull itself out of devastating poverty, there was now an overwhelming argument for hope.

The first refugees I met at M'Berra were from a place in the desert just west of Lere. Mohammed Ag Hawadan and his family once lived as nomads. They wandered in search of grazing land for their livestock, until the droughts of the early '80s wiped them out. He arrived in Mau-

ritania with his wife, son and three daughters in 1991. Members of his wife's family had been killed by soldiers. At M'Berra camp, Mohammed found work in the camp hospital. When I met him he was spending much of his day going from tent to tent, advising his fellow refugees on medical matters. "What I do is very important," he told me, with evident pride. "Especially making sure that the children receive their vaccinations."

Was he now prepared to go back to Mali? He said he was. The chief of the Tuareg clan to which Mohammed and his family belong had already gone back to the spot near Lere, to prepare the way for the others. "It's another life now," Mohammed explained. "Before, people worked with animals and passed that work tradition down from generation to generation. Now there are no more animals, and schooling has become much more important."

The following day I met a group of slaves who had managed to set themselves free. Even though slavery has been officially outlawed in Mali and Mauritania, the practice continues among certain groups of Moor and Tuareg who draw slaves from, respectively, the Harratin and the Bella populations.

The Bellas I met had arrived in the camp as the "property" of some Tuareg shepherds. When the shepherds decided to go back to Mali, the Bellas refused to accompany them. "We no longer wanted to be attached to someone," explained Alhousseini Ag Goulounbou, the Bella chieftain. "We wanted our independence."

I stayed in M'Berra camp long enough to get to know a few refugee families.

I watched children learn to count in the school. I saw women doing the hardest work — building tents, dying fabric, pounding the millet before sunrise and then starting again as soon as the twilight had cut the day's heat. One of those women told me, "If I have no work, I'll look for something to sew or I'll do some other task so that I'm not idle."

I also got to know a few more people on the UNHCR side of the fence. Paolo Artini is a field officer based in Bassikounou, about 17 km northwest of M'Berra camp. He has the ability to navigate around a refugee camp more comfortably than I can navigate around my kitchen. Better than that, Paolo has an easy rapport with people in general, and with the refugees at M'Berra in particular, and he managed to save me from my own ignorance on more than one occasion.

Paolo has worked as a protection officer in Kuwait and Armenia, but he seems ideally suited to the work that has to be done in a camp situation. He takes an active role in organizing convoys, sometimes driving the trucks, and occasionally he participates in fact-finding missions to repatriation sites.

After I had left M'Berra I crossed paths with Paolo a week later in Timbuktu. He had come there with six refugee leaders — three Moor, three Tuareg — who had wanted to see for themselves what Mali had in store for them. "It isn't like I'm UNHCR staff and they're refugees," Paolo explained. "We all eat together, sitting on the ground. We're just people who came together from M'Berra, and we want to stay together. At one point they thanked me and said, 'You can't know someone if you don't travel with him.'"

I asked Paolo about his future plans. "I'd like to stay in Africa, but the refugees are leaving M'Berra very quickly. The camp will probably be closed by the end of the year."

For all the questions
that remained about Mali's future,
there was now an overwhelming argument
for hope.

**Randall Koral**

# More turmoil in northern Iraq

September was a tumultuous month in northern Iraq. On the last day of August the people of the Kurdish-administered region awoke to news that the main city of Erbil had been seized by forces of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) backed by Iraqi government troops. The surprise attack came as the representatives from the KDP and its long term rival, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), were involved in American-sponsored peace talks in London. The KDP justified its action by saying that it was responding to a buildup of Iranian forces in the region. Both Iran and the PUK denied such allegations.

Over the next week, the KDP consolidated its position and on 9 September seized Sulaimaniyah, the PUK's main stronghold near the Iranian border — this time without the help of mainstream Iraqi forces.

> Many of those who felt they had nothing in particular to fear from the new KDP regime started returning, thereby averting a large-scale emergency.

The PUK, written off by many as it withdrew in disarray to the Iranian border, suddenly rose from the dead and recaptured Sulaimaniyah on 12 October without a fight. In what looked increasingly like the mirror image of the KDP's lightning advances a month earlier, the PUK immediately began fighting its way north towards Erbil, threatening to win back everything it had lost. However, by early November, the situation in northern Iraq appeared to have stabilized, with the KDP still in control of Erbil and the PUK reinstalled in Sulaimaniyah (in other words the two parties had more or less returned to their positions before May 1994 when the PUK originally captured Erbil from the KDP).

A cease-fire was soon reached between the KDP and the PUK. Unfortunately, a great deal of humanitarian damage had been done in the meantime. Some 65,000 new Iraqi Kurd refugees took shelter in Iran. Operation Provide Comfort, the air umbrella to protect the Kurds, was undermined and the international network of aid and development programs was severely damaged.

The refugees fled in two separate waves. While the fall of Erbil had produced very little displacement, during the KDP capture of Sulaimaniyah an estimated 75,000 people headed down the road towards the Iranian border in scenes disturbingly reminiscent of the huge 1991 displacement of close to 2 million northern Iraqi Kurds.

Fortunately, once word spread that hardly a shot had been fired in Sulaimaniyah, many of those who felt they had nothing in particular to fear from the new KDP regime started returning, thereby averting a large-scale emergency. In the end, 42,000 people actually crossed into Iran over the next week or so, with a few thousand remaining displaced on the Iraqi side of the border. Most of the rest were back in their homes in Sulaimaniyah within two or three days.

While most refugees said they had left because of fears about what might happen in Iraq, some of those who did in the end cross the border, did so almost arbitrarily: one group told a UNHCR team surveying the main border crossing points that their main reason for entering Iran was they did not have enough fuel in their vehicles to return to Sulaimaniyah.

The second wave of refugees, who took the total of new arrivals up to some 65,000, entered Iran as a result of the second round of fighting. Even though Sulaimaniyah itself once more emerged unscathed, various smaller towns were less fortunate.

Once in Iran, the new refugees soon faced various problems. Acting with commendable speed, the Iranian authorities, and in particular the Iranian Red Crescent, set up camps and started trying to satisfy the basic humanitarian needs with assistance from UNHCR and Médecins Sans Frontières. However, the remoteness and military sensitivity of the border region was soon hampering the aid effort. More seriously, the proximity of some of the camps to the border led to a series of security incidents. One camp in particular, Tileh Kooh, which was located only a couple of kilometers from a prolonged border battle between PUK and KDP fighters, was hit on at least two occasions by stray bullets and shells.

As well as sending a number of teams to monitor the assistance and protection conditions in the camps, and providing 1,000 family tents and 9,000 plastic sheets, UNHCR donated an initial sum of $3.1 million to the Iranian relief effort, on the condition that UNHCR staff would have full access to the refugees and that the camps would be moved away from the border area, which not only was proving insecure but was also, with winter fast approaching, located at too high an altitude for tented camps. Already by the end of September, the temperature was dropping close to freezing point at night. By early November, with snow already appearing on the mountains, the camps had still not been relocated, and UNHCR's Tehran office was growing increasingly alarmed and frustrated by the lack of progress on this and other issues. By the end of November, bitterly cold weather and exposed conditions prompted most of the Iraqi Kurds to return home. UNHCR and some humanitarian NGOs made it known that undue pressure had been used by the Iranian authorities to induce refugees to return. A little over 1,000 refugees were finally relocated from Ghamtareh border reception center to Zarean-e-Khoy camp in West Azerbaijan province by mid-December. By the end of December 1996, reportedly only a few hundred remain in Seyranband, Kurdestan province.

On the Iraqi side of the border, the problems left over by the events in September were even greater. In the wake of the U.S. cruise-missile strikes against Iraq's southern air defenses, many of the NGOs operating in northern Iraq, and in particular the U.S. NGOs, beat a hasty retreat, as did the ground component of Operation Provide Comfort, which had up until then been based in the city of Zakho, near the Turkish border. Perhaps even more damaging was the loss of numerous skilled local staff working for foreign or United Nations agencies, through fear of retribution for the air strikes, or possible association with spy rings that had allegedly been operating in northern Iraq.

The dramatic events in September heightened international tensions and brought the situation in northern Iraq squarely back on to the international agenda. The conflict between the two main Kurdish parties in northern Iraq had caused a power vacuum, opening the possibility that outside forces could try to exploit the situation for their own ends.

Even before the events this autumn when many NGOs had to withdraw, and local staff became frightened for their safety, the extraordinary position of northern Iraq in relation to its ▶

▶ northern, eastern and southern neighbors, made life extremely difficult for relief agencies. In order for international staff to work in the north, they have to obtain visas from Baghdad. U.N. agencies have their main offices in the capital, Baghdad — as they would in any other country. Special arrangements were made for U.N. staff to cross freely to and from the north — and on the whole these agreements have been honored. However, in times of crisis, it can be difficult to get extra staff into the north in a hurry.

Evacuation plans and security procedures are extremely complex. Getting in relief supplies has also been difficult at times: first, because of the international sanctions which apply to the whole of Iraq, and second because Baghdad had previously imposed its own embargo on the north.

Nowadays, UNHCR plays two main roles in northern Iraq. One is to facilitate the repatriation and reintegration of Iraqi refugees still in Iran, who were continuing to trickle home at the rate of a few thousand a year. The second is to protect and assist two groups of refugees: around 14,000 Turkish Kurds located in a camp in the western Dohuk governate, and about 4,000 Iranian Kurds scattered around Erbil and Sulaimaniyah in the east.

Both groups have been badly affected by the military incursions of their respective countries of origin — living in fear that they will be mistaken for fighters belonging to the same ethnic groups. When the Turkish Kurd refugees first entered northern Iraq in 1994, they were initially scattered around close to the Turkish border. They resisted UNHCR's initial attempts to move them down to a camp well away from the border, until a couple of cross-border bombing raids helped change their minds. By March 1995, around half of them had been moved to two small camps near a village called Atroush, some 60 kilometers from Dohuk. The other half were still up by the border when 35,000 Turkish troops came into the country in one of several attempts to put an end to cross-border raids by Turkey's Kurdish separatist group, the PKK. After that year the remainder were also moved to Atroush.

Nevertheless, there were continuing allegations that the Atroush camps were harboring fighters. The allegations usually centered on Atroush A, which was located close to some hills where the PKK sometimes operated. So in October and November 1995, UNHCR moved the refugees to Atroush B, which was well away from the hills and therefore easier to monitor.

However, since that time it has become increasingly difficult for UNHCR to carry out its humanitarian mandate in the camp. In September 1995, refugees in Atroush A took UNHCR staff hostage as human shields during fighting between a local Iraqi Kurdish group and the Turkish Kurdish separatist group, the PKK. By late 1996, it became clear that a small number of activists within the camp were dominating the majority, which is made up of women, children and elderly men. For their own political reasons, these activists were keen to prevent refugees there from returning home to Turkey. The hostile actions of this group meant it became increasingly difficult for UNHCR to gain access to the camps. On 1st December, UNHCR staff who went to the camp to distribute leaflets referring to the option of voluntary repatriation to Turkey were confronted by a hostile crowd of some 2,000 refugees. They and their vehicles were stoned and refugees tried to block the exit from the camp.

> It became increasingly difficult for UNHCR to carry out its humanitarian mandate in the Atroush camp.

On 21 December UNHCR announced that it was pulling out of Atroush because it felt that the humanitarian and non-political nature of the camp had been compromised to such an extent that it could no longer provide its services there. It told the refugees — who had received a one month food and kerosene ration the week before — that no further rations would be forthcoming. It was made clear to them that the local Iraqi Kurdish authorities would help the refugees to go to transit camps at Muqibla and Balkus where they would hear the assurances offered by the Turkish government about the welcome they would receive if they wished to return home. It was stressed that it was entirely up to the refugees themselves to decide what to do. If they wished to remain in northern Iraq, UNHCR would provide them with assistance on an individual basis. However, by the end of 1996, no significant numbers of refugees had left Atroush.

The Iranian Kurd refugees were caught in a similar if much shorter-lived situation in July, when more than 1,000 fled to the UNHCR office in Erbil, fearing they would be caught up in the Iranian military attempt to neutralize Iranian Kurd opposition fighters. Although the Iranian operation only lasted several days, and no refugees came to any harm, there were still refugees sheltering in a school next to the UNHCR office in Erbil, when that city fell to the KDP. Another group of nearly 400 refugees, who had fled to a warehouse in the town of Rania in July were also still there when that town fell as well.

All of which makes northern Iraq one of the most difficult places in which UNHCR is currently operating.

**Rupert Colville**

# Afghanistan: A sense of foreboding

Masooda Aminullah invites me to sit down and sends one of her young sons to fetch tea. She lives with her husband and their five children (and, occasionally, her brother) in a fourth-floor, two-room flat in Kabul. The Soviet-built apartment blocks are pock-marked with evidence of past shelling and street fighting, their facades stained with soot from the chimneys of makeshift stoves. Most of the surrounding trees have long since been cut for fuel wood.

Despite the bleak, dusty surroundings, with rubble heaped in piles here and there, children continue to play in the courtyards. Their laughter can be heard through the plastic sheet that has replaced Masooda's windows. We sit on the floor: there is no furniture.

Masooda and her husband Ghulam are teachers. Originally from Kabul, they returned to the city one year ago from exile in Pakistan. Their return, they hoped, would mark the end of a cycle of displacement which has driven them from their home on three occasions. Their first departure occurred in July 1992, when aerial bombardment forced the family to flee to the safety of Ghulam's father's house in Karte Seh, a suburb of Kabul. Masooda considers herself lucky: four days later, the family home was destroyed. In January 1994, as factional fighting for control of Kabul spread, the family was obliged to move to Jalalabad, where they took up residence in Sar Shahi camp, a sprawling center for internally displaced Afghans, mostly from Kabul, which at one time sheltered 120,000 people. Life proved increasingly difficult there, as competition for resources mounted. In January 1995, the family again moved on, this time to Peshawar in Pakistan. There they took up residence with Masooda's brother.

Seven-year-old Wahid arrives with the tea. He carefully pours four glasses for the visitors and offers each of us sweets, under Masooda's approving gaze. She pauses to ensure that we have all we need before continuing her story. "Life in Pakistan was very difficult," she says. "Because we were not in the camps, we had no assistance. We had no identity cards, and the police would harass us. My brother was arrested and beaten after a bombing in Peshawar. Afghans were blamed. Ghulam decided that we should return to Kabul. We thought we might find jobs, or at least be able to send the children to school. Ghulam is teaching now, but his pay is very little. It doesn't even pay the rent. We get by selling small things, but it is very hard." Inexplicably, she smiles.

That brief moment of courtesy and hope took place in early September, and I wonder if Masooda can smile now. On 27 September 1996, the Taliban Islamic militia took control of Kabul. Little resistance was offered by retreating government forces. Outbreaks of violence did occur, however, as the Taliban implemented their particularly extreme version of Islamic law. Women and girls bore the brunt of new restrictions, including a ban on their employment and education. Women were ordered to remain at home, or wear the tent-like *burqa* in public. Kabul University was closed and the entire staff of the High Court was suspended, from judges to cleaners. Men were given 45 days to grow beards.

Many who dared show defiance to the Taliban were arrested, beaten and detained, including some local staff working for aid agencies and media organizations. International assistance stalled, as women staff members of United Nations agencies and non-governmental organizations were forced to remain at home. Without their expertise, vital needs assessment surveys, program design, implementation and monitoring cannot take place. At the time of writing, Kabul is eerily calm, but there is a sense of foreboding, of anticipation of something unspecified but ominous. Kabulis are nervous and quiet. Unused to the conservative orthodoxy of the Taliban, yet unsure what to do, they simply wait.

"It is true that the Taliban have delivered a measure of security in Kabul," said UNHCR Chief of Mission in Afghanistan, Daniel Bellamy. "Now that they occupy the city, bombardment has more or less stopped, at least for the time being. Aerial attacks are much rarer than before. But that could change at any moment — the front line is not far from the city. Criminal activity has ▶

▶ reduced, as the Taliban have established patrols throughout the city, and the threat of punishment is explicit. But all of these improvements have occurred at a high cost. The human rights of Kabulis, never accorded great respect, continue to be violated."

The Taliban emerged in early 1994 from religious schools (called *madrassat*) near Quetta, Pakistan, at a time when factional fighting and resulting lawlessness were at their height. Originally a small band of warriors from the majority Pashtoon tribe, their numbers swelled as they met with increasing success. Their takeover of the southern Afghan city of Kandahar, in April 1994, was welcomed by its citizens, who had long suffered under corrupt and brutal *mujehadeen* commanders. The Taliban (the name derives from the Arabic word for student) quickly established order in Kandahar, disarming all factions and the general population.

A Pashtoon city, Kandahar has accepted the Taliban's strict version of *sharia* (Islamic law), which is more or less consistent with local traditions. Today it is peaceful. But for the Taliban, *sharia* law means public executions after trials which pay scant attention to any notion of due process. It means the gruesome spectacle of the Minister of Health personally amputating the hands and feet of suspected thieves.

Subsequently, however, the Taliban swept through southwestern Afghanistan, and arrived in Herat, close to the Iranian border, in September 1995. Here their reign has been less welcome. Most Herat residents are Tajik, and accustomed to a more liberal tradition. They particularly reject the Taliban prohibition on education for girls. As Dari speakers, they view the Pashto-speaking Taliban as an occupation force. Many Heratis have sent their families into exile in Iran, where they hope their girls can be educated, or at least avoid the harshness of the Taliban regime. Some women, former teachers, have organized secret schools in their homes. For many, the future does not look bright.

Save the Children (UK), an international non-governmental organization, suspended operations in Herat following the imposition of Taliban restrictions. "It's Catch-22," said Angela Kearney, Save the Children's program manager for Afghanistan. "When we left, we knew we were leaving behind women and girls who desperately need our help. But how could we stay when we were prevented from having access to them?"

United Nations agencies were forced into the same difficult position. Following the lead of UNICEF, a middle course was adopted for the entire country. No new education projects will be initiated unless equal access for girls and boys is guaranteed. Resources slated for these projects will be redirected to locations where all children have equal access to education. These measures, admittedly, address only part of the problem. Agencies are still deprived of their women staff — a constraint imposed by the Taliban with explicit threats of violence against both employee and employer. With two thirds of the country under Taliban control by the end of 1996, including all of Afghanistan's major cities (except Mazar-i-Sharif, the northern stronghold of General Abdul Rashid Dostum) the opportunities for girls to be educated are remote. According to the 1996 Human Development Report, the overall literacy rate in Afghanistan is only 30 percent. The female literacy rate is a paltry 13.5 percent. It is a bad situation, getting worse.

> "The human rights of Kabulis, never accorded great respect, continue to be violated."

Since the fall of the Communist government of the late President Najibullah in April 1992, almost four million Afghans have returned to their country. Another 2.4 million remain in exile, mostly in Iran and Pakistan. In response to the changes in the country in the last year, most Afghan refugees and some countries of asylum have adopted a wait-and-see attitude. Voluntary repatriation has slowed considerably,

with only 120,000 from Pakistan and a mere 8,000 from Iran by the end of the year. (The target figures for 1996 were 250,000 and 500,000, respectively). An annual repatriation rate which exceeds 100,000 would be considered a great success elsewhere; in the context of two million exiles, these figures seem slight.

Bellamy remains optimistic. "Our object," he says, "is sustainable return. Our programs in Afghanistan have been fraught with difficulties since their inception. Yet the conditions for returning Afghans have visibly improved in almost every corner of the country. At present, we have more than 400 Quick Impact Projects, with a total value of more than $3,000,000. We also have five or six more substantial projects, each worth between $500,000 and $1,000,000. These cover every sector: water, health, sanitation, shelter, education, vocational training, irrigation, income generation, you name it. We will continue." He pauses for thought. "No," he says. "Change that. Put down 'we must continue'."

**Steven Wolfson**

# Liberia: Shaking off bad memories

It was meant to be a year of promise for Liberia. The Abuja Agreement, signed by the Liberian warlords on 19 August 1995, made provisions for disarming the militias, deploying the mainly Nigerian, ECOMOG troops — the West African peace-keeping force — throughout the territory, setting up of a skeletal administration in a country devastated by civil war, preparing for the return of thousands of refugees from neighboring countries and organizing free and democratic elections. All that was supposed to happen in 1996.

1996 has just ended. Apart from disarming several hundred fighters, the results have been disastrous. Armed militias still control the area around Monrovia and the back country. The ECOMOG "white helmets" have run into great difficulties in deploying their forces because of insecurity and lack of funds, which the superpowers had promised to contribute. Some 750,000 Liberian refugees are still in Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Ghana, Nigeria and Sierra Leone. Elections are scheduled for 30 May 1997 "at the latest." Another Abuja Agreement — the 13th peace treaty since the outbreak of the conflict — has replaced the previous one.

1996 has been a year marked by a renewal of violence, especially in Monrovia, which had until then been considered a haven of peace. The fighting began on 6 April when the provisional authorities tried to arrest

With more than 2,000 persons on board, the Bulk Challenge was turned back by one port after another.

the leader of one of the factions, Roosevelt Johnson, who is a suspected accomplice in a murder case.

Starting on 6 April and for several weeks, Monrovia was engulfed by violence and horror. Stores were looted. Offices and warehouses of the humanitarian agencies were sacked, forcing them to evacuate all non-essential personnel. Nothing seemed to stop the spiral of violence. Not even an orphanage was spared. On 30 April armed men assaulted and looted the Vahun Children's Center, an orphanage run jointly by a local agency and UNHCR, where 75 unaccompanied Sierra Leonean children and some 20 Liberian orphans were sheltered.

The Ministry of Health building that sheltered 1,200 Sierra Leonean refugees and 4,300 displaced Liberians was seized by armed men, who made it their barracks. Refugees and displaced persons fled and ended up crammed in a former UNICEF warehouse that had been looted at the onset of the hostilities and had no water or toilet facilities.

Part of the population sought refuge in the compound of the United States Embassy, protected by American soldiers and located in the residential district of Mamba Point. Thousands of others tried to leave Monrovia, a city at the mercy of drugged teen-agers, their bodies wound with amulets in a mad search for invincibility.

In the good old days, Liberia owed its international reputation to its rubber plantations, under the management of the American tire company, Firestone, and especially to its naval convenience flags. In 1996, the "First African Republic" founded in 1847 by a group of emancipated slaves, has given birth to an unprecedented phenomenon in the Gulf of Guinea: boat people. But unlike the Vietnamese and the Somalis, the Liberians were not fleeing from a totalitarian state, but from the absence of a state, from havoc, death and desolation.

After being stripped of their meager savings — 70, at times 100 dollars — the most fortunate of them were finally taken on board dilapidated vessels: Bulk Challenge, Victory Reefer, Zolotitsa. But no port would accept their passengers. With more than 2,000 persons on board — mostly Liberians, but also some Ghanaians and Nigerians — the Bulk Challenge was turned back by Côte d'Ivoire, which has already taken in 350,000 Liberian refugees. Then it was declared *non desiderata* by Ghana, that already shelters 15,000 of them.

The Victory Reefer was driven out of the territorial waters of Sierra Leone. The Russian trawler, Zolotitsa, with its 450 passengers, suffered the same fate in Ghana, and then in Togo. No one wants to take in the "outcasts of the sea." Epidemics broke out on board the ships. Everything was in short supply — food, drinking water, medicine and, above all, breathing room.

On 13 May, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Sadako Ogata, appealed to the West African countries to receive the Liberian boat people. "I am very concerned about the situation of the people aboard these vessels. They have been at sea for some days now. The situation has become desperate. Unless the door is opened to them, a lot of people, many of them women and children, may die."

Then, on 14 May a miracle happened: ten days after the beginning of their odyssey, the Bulk Challenge was authorized to enter the Ghanaian port of Takoradi, where the ship had tried to dock twice unsuccessfully. The passengers were assisted by the local authorities, UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies, and then taken to the Essipong camp on the outskirts of the city.

In a climate of international protest, the Victory Reefer received authorization to drop anchor in the port of Freetown. And, after wandering the Gulf of Guinea for several weeks, turned back by one port after another, the Zolotitsa made a surprise return to Monrovia, which was still under militia control.

A new year is beginning. The guns have fallen silent in Liberia. The announced disarmament has — timidly — begun. The enemies of yesterday appear to want to live together again. The Bulk Challenge, the Victory Reefer and the Zolotitsa are no more than bad memories. But, despite such encouraging signs, Liberia is still the third largest "producer" of refugees in the world. Liberia desperately needs the help of the international community to complete the deployment of the ECOMOG "white helmets" throughout the country, to prepare the return of refugees, and to organize, at last, free and democratic elections.

**FRANCIS KPATINDÉ**

### THE WAY OF LIFE IN PEACETOWN

The name of this village, nestled among palm groves, reflects its way of life: Peacetown. Located 400 kms west of Abidjan, the economic capital of Côte d'Ivoire, Peacetown is the antithesis of the murderous fighting that has been tearing Liberia apart for more than six years. Here, the houses are decked with flowers and large signs at the entrance of the village welcome visitors.

Peacetown was founded by the survivors of an attack on the village of Tai, 80 kms further south, carried out by the Liberian Peace Council in June 1995. The attack resulted in 32 dead and caused other refugees to flee. In their flight, the refugees halted in the region of Guiglo. Peacetown was born.

Here oil lamps are used for light. No one dies of hunger. There are no beggars. People farm and tend their little flocks. And,occasionally, they do business. The maquis, those cheap restaurants so famous in many West African countries, are numerous in Peacetown. So, one may taste "bicycle chicken" at the Silver and Gold Restaurant, rice with tomato and cassava sauce at the Kings and Queens or at the Potato Green Soup.

However, Peacetown is not free of problems. Medicines are in short supply or are sold at exorbitant prices. However, churches of the most varied denominations abound and are never empty on the Lord's day. God watches over Peacetown.

FK

Nine million on the move

# Managing refugees and migrants in the CIS

On 30 and 31 May 1996, delegates from 87 countries, 34 international organizations and 77 NGOs gathered in Geneva to attend the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) Conference on Refugees and Migrants, which had been convened by UNHCR in close co-operation with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

In an age of conference fatigue, the hailing of the CIS Conference as the most important preventative exercise of recent years might be looked upon with scepticism. Yet, because it was a "first" in many respects, and a successful one, the CIS Conference deserves special mention among the many international events of 1996.

Since the early 1990s, unprecedented population movements have taken place on the territory of the CIS countries. These movements, the biggest, quickest and most complex that have occurred in the region since World War II, have led to a total of nine million uprooted people. They are part of what has been called "the human legacy of the Soviet Union" — the intricate mixing of people and ethnic groups resulting from seventy years of population movements, whether voluntary or coerced, planned or disorderly, or driven by economic, social or totalitarian concerns.

Victims of this chaotic and painful unmixing of populations include refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) from the various conflicts in the Caucasus, who are still unable to go back to their homes; Crimean Tatars, who along with many other groups were deported to Central Asia in the 1940s and now long to return to their historical homeland; ecological migrants from Chernobyl and Kazakstan, displaced from their communities by man-made environmental disasters; Russian-speakers leaving Central Asia *en masse*, because they do not feel at home there any longer; migrants transiting illegally through the region heading West, looking for a better life; and the latest unfortunate group comprising the IDPs from the bloody conflict in Chechnya.

> Population movements have strained the limited resources of the CIS countries.

These population movements have strained the limited resources of the newly independent countries, all of which lack the experience and institutions to manage the sudden large-scale displacement of people. These challenges also threaten to undermine their efforts to bring about political and economic transformation.

Outflows are resulting in brain-drains and the disruption of local economies, although in the short term they may alleviate current socio-economic difficulties. Inflows strain the social infrastructures, particularly in the education and health sectors, and distort the housing and labour markets. Illegal migration is often linked to trafficking, drugs and arms smuggling and organized crime. Relations between migrants, the local population and the authorities at the community level are increasingly tense.

The CIS countries were not in a position to cope with these rapidly unfolding developments. Because the nature and scale of the movements had changed, the administrative structures and legislative basis inherited from the Soviet period proved inappropriate and insufficient to manage migratory flows and alleviate the plight of the displaced. Policies and programs, previously elaborated at the Union level, had to be designed without institutional experience or trained personnel. The CIS countries lacked efficient border control systems, emergency preparedness capabilities, reliable information systems, appropriate early warning structures and adequate financial resources. The lack of structures in turn aggravated population displacement problems.

While all the CIS countries agreed that these growing problems needed to be addressed, no one state would take the initiative on its own, as many of the issues surrounding population displacement in the post-Soviet context were — and remain — extremely sensitive. They touch upon fundamental questions relating to citizenship, state succession

and the limits of state sovereignty; the right of peoples to self-determination, secession and the status of international borders; the responsibility of successor states in the face of their predecessor's wrongdoing, and the difficult balancing of old crimes and new misdeeds; the rights of minorities and the viability of multi-ethnic societies; and, more broadly, the geopolitical configuration of the CIS as a whole. Questions that no one wanted to broach.

It soon became clear that if population displacement issues were to be successfully tackled, or even tackled at all, they needed to be addressed at a regional level, since they concern all CIS states. Also, they needed to be dealt within a multilateral forum, where each state would have equal status; in a humanitarian and neutral setting, with mediation by international organizations acting as catalysts and facilitators, so as to de-politicize the debates; and with the active participation and backing of the wider international community.

The CIS Conference provided all these elements. For the first time ever, the twelve CIS countries got together in an international setting to discuss their migration and population displacement problems. During almost a two-year period, CIS representatives had the opportunity to meet regularly and to discuss at length their shared migration and displacement problems. In the corridors of the Palais des Nations, one could spot the Armenian and Azerbaijani delegates, whose countries are officially at war with each other, talking eagerly about ways and means of exchanging information on each other's refugees, and devising schemes for compensating those who had been deprived of all their possessions. Or one could watch the Kyrgyz delegation listening carefully to their Tajik colleagues' presentation of the repatriation of refugees from Afghanistan, and wondering whether a similar mechanism could apply to their own country.

But the CIS Conference was more than just a talking shop: it also helped shed some light — for the first time ever — on the nature, scope and scale of the population movements occurring throughout the region. In the course of the lengthy preparatory process, participants had the opportunity to analyze thoroughly the various flows taking place in the region, to identify the types of movements which were of particu- ▶

UNHCR H. HOFMANN

● Georgian IDPs from Abkhazia at a food parcel production line in Batumi run by Action Internationale Contre la Faim.

UNHCR J. ISAKSEN

UNHCR A. HOLLMANN

● Imishli camp for displaced persons in Azerbaijan.

● Ethnic Russians in Tajikistan listen to a Russian official explain the formalities involved in the return to the "motherland".

Despite the two years of intensive effort, the real work has only just begun.

▶ lar concern and to classify them scrupulously.

In the process, they managed to de-politicize some of the categories used in the region, which had become sources of tension between various CIS countries.

Once the categories were clear, participants collectively assessed which ones could be examined within the framework of existing international standards, and which ones could not. In the first case, concepts used in the CIS region were standardized and brought into line with relevant international conventions and instruments, while in the second case existing concepts were clarified or new categories devised.

Categories are not only of concern to lawyers and entomologists. Words shape our thinking, and thoughts shape policies, which ultimately affect people's lives. Furthermore, in order to engage in dialogue and cooperate with each other, people (and, even more so, countries) need to have a common language. Hence the usefulness of such an elaborate terminological review of the movements taking place in the CIS countries.

This review also contributed to enhancing the international community's awareness and understanding of the displacement-related problems faced by the CIS countries. It allowed the CIS countries to put their problems in a regional perspective, and to realize the links between the population movements they are experiencing and those taking place in neighboring countries. Last but not least, it helped the international organizations better understand existing needs.

Once the nature of the flows was clarified, participants were asked to analyze displacement-related problems and discuss possible solutions. The result of this exercise — once again a "first" in the region — was the elaboration of a Program of Action that contained a strategy to address migration and displacement problems in the CIS countries agreed upon by all participants.

To make the strategy truly comprehensive, and ensure its effective implementation, the drafting process drew upon a wide spectrum of parties: the CIS countries themselves, which bear the primary responsibility for addressing the displacement problems taking place in their territories; neighboring and other countries concerned with the impact of these problems on regional and international stability; and international organizations and NGOs active or interested in the region. Inter-agency cooperation was particularly enhanced by the joint organization of the process by UNHCR, IOM and OSCE, all three of which drew on their institutional expertise to address a range of issues that goes beyond any of their individual mandates.

For all the innovative features of the CIS Conference, its real success will be measured by its long-term achievements. The Program of Action will have to be translated from words into reality. For this to happen, the continued commitment of all concerned will be crucial. IOM and UNHCR fully intend to meet this challenge, and have developed a Joint Operational Strategy to ensure greater coordination of their activities and achieve a pragmatic division of labor in the region. The CIS countries will now have to demonstrate their political will and operational capacity to tackle displacement problems, while the international community will need to show its continued support for this endeavor by providing tangible assistance to these countries. In other words, despite the two years of intensive effort that led up to the conference, the real work has only just begun.

**Claire Messina**
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Letter from Sarajevo

# Traffic jams and tragedy, one year after Dayton

UNHCR/ H.J. DAVIES

July 1996: Bosnian women and children from Srebrenica commemorate the first anniversary of the disappearance of their husbands and fathers. The banners display the names of their loved ones.

As Bosnia slowly recovers from four years of carnage, things are going well — on the surface. But the wounds of war are far from healed, and ethnic divisions, often fueled by cynical local politicians, run deep. UNHCR faces an uphill struggle in trying to help refugees and the displaced return to their homes. There may be a light at the end of the tunnel, but it's sometimes hard to make it out.

Sarajevo. Welcome to Sarajevo 11 months after Dayton. The city has almost everything, including atrocious traffic jams. The streets are full of people until late at night. New elegant shops, restaurants and bars have been springing up everywhere. Pricey and shiny products of Germanys' automobile industry cruise along Marshal Tito street. Western limos have become as frequent a sight as little rickety Yugos. Potholes are being filled and street lamps shine again.

In the evening, countless restaurants fill up with affluent expats and well-to-do local businessmen. There are beauty parlors, health clubs and saunas. Soon, Sarajevo will have two restaurants offering Asian cuisine. The city has already hosted its first ▶

▶ international soccer match and received its first post war package tourists (from Barcelona, a sister city).

Sarajevo's battered airport, once a favorite target of besieging gunners, is open to commercial flights. The train station is again a train station, rather than a burnt out shell. Last summer, for the first time in five years, Sarajevans could again take their children to the warmth of the Adriatic coast.

But the bustle of Sarajevo is only one face of Bosnia today. The other is that of crowded refugee centers filled with people who are slowly abandoning their hope of ever being able to go home.

It is the grim reality of the women of Srebrenica who still do not know where their loved ones are or how they died.

It is the reality of terrified ethnic minorities in Banja Luka, who still fear violent eviction from their homes.

It is the reality of indicted war criminals who are not just at large but also continue to wield considerable power, instilling fear in all decent people.

It is the reality of nightly destruction of minority property, precisely aimed to ensure that minorities never return.

It is the reality of millions of deadly land mines that have yet to be removed.

It is the reality of tens of thousands of people physically maimed and psychologically scarred by war, many of whom lack the stamina to face the future.

It is a sad reality of tens of thousands of Sarajevo Serbs who fled the city last winter in an senseless exodus encouraged by their own leaders. These urban people are now crammed into refugee centers in the middle of nowhere.

Over a year after the guns fell silent, there are still no telephone connections between the Muslim-Croat Federation and the Serb entity of Bosnia. From either Sarajevo or Pale it is an easy matter to call New York or Rio de Janeiro. But one cannot simply pick up the phone in Sarajevo and call Pale, a few kilometers away.

The river Neretva, which passes through the ancient city of Mostar, in Herzegovina, is spanned by new bridges. But few Muslims and Croats dare to venture to the other side.

Despite the arrival of peace and the stabilizing presence of the NATO-led Peace Implementation Force, efforts to rebuild the multi-ethnic fabric of Bosnia-Herzegovina have encountered huge resistance, making UNHCR's task of assisting in the return of refugees and displaced persons immensely difficult.

The bustle of Sarajevo is only one face of Bosnia today. The other is that of crowded refugee centers filled with people who are slowly abandoning their hope of ever being able to go home.

A year after Dayton, only an estimated 220,000 to 250,000 people (out of 2,000,000 refugees and displaced) have returned to their homes. This figure comprises some 20,000 organized returns and many spontaneous movements, both within the country and from abroad. Though substantial, it is way below UNHCR's original expectations.

UNHCR has focused on fostering voluntary return. The agency has even resorted to such unusual measures as establishing free bus services between the entities. Despite occasional harassment by the authorities, the busing operation has been quite successful, allowing thousands of people to travel across the inter-entity boundary line on a daily basis. The white-painted UNHCR buses have now become a familiar sight on Bosnia's roads.

In another effort to bring the ethnic groups together, UNHCR has organized assessment visits by the displaced to their places of origin. But this effort has been largely blocked by hostility — displayed openly or more discreetly — by local authorities who simply do not want any minorities to return. In some cases, visiting groups of refugees have been greeted by a hail of stones from very well organized "spontaneous demonstrators."

And yet, in conversations with individual people in both entities, one seldom encounters the hostile attitude which seems so prevalent in the officialdom. Many people have told me they are sick and tired of the official separatist propaganda beamed daily by state-controlled media. Many people say they actually miss the good old times when ethnicity did not matter. Some say they are hurt and embarrassed when they hear foreigners talk about the Balkan ethnic groups hating each other and not being able to live with each other. All that most people want is to be able to go back home and live peacefully alongside their neighbors. In fact, many people in this country — on all sides — despise the entire concept of ethnic purity.

During one of few successful assessment visits by a group of Muslims to the town of Sipovo, in Republika Srpska, my UNHCR colleagues witnessed a very warm and friendly reunion of former neighbors who were genuinely moved and happy to see each other again.

Despite all odds, there is some hope that Bosnia's ethnic groups will one day be able to live together again — if they are allowed to do so.

**Kris Janowski**

# Assistance to internally displaced persons from Chechnya

The North Caucasus has seen the worst population displacement in the Russian Federation since the breakup of the Soviet Union. In addition to a short but bitter ethnic conflict which took place in 1991 between Ingushetia and North Ossetia — and which resulted in the displacement of several tens of thousands of people — the conflict in Chechnya has had an enormous impact on the civilian population. ▶

Chechnya: Families mourn their dead after their houses were bombed by planes.

UNHCR / I. VAN DER STOCK

▶ Countless numbers of persons have died as a result of the fighting, and it is estimated that some 400,000 persons have had to leave Chechnya for locations throughout the Russian Federation. A large number of these persons are Russian-speaking former residents of Grozny who may never have the opportunity to return home. Others, mainly of Chechen origin have remained in the neighboring republics of Ingushetia and Daghestan. Many of these persons have been displaced once, twice, or even three times during the 20 months of conflict.

In 1995, the United Nations was requested by the Russian authorities to provide humanitarian assistance; in 1996, it was asked to extend its program. In April 1996 an inter-agency appeal for emergency assistance was issued to cover the needs of some 92,000 persons — down from the original figure of 220,000 assisted the previous year. UNHCR's component of the appeal in 1996 amounted to US $ 6.5 million.

"It should also be clearly kept in mind that many displaced persons have experienced such trauma that they are not likely to return to their former place of residence."

In January 1996 the Chechnya conflict spilled over for the first time into Daghestan when Chechen separatists attacked the town of Kyzlyar and seized several hundred hostages in that village and in the village of Pervomayskoye near the Chechen-Daghestan border. The UNHCR sub-office in Makhachkala provided material assistance to Daghestan authorities to help those Daghestanis who were displaced from the village of Pervomayskoe by the heavy fighting which then took place.

Heavy fighting also took place the following March in Sernovodsk and Samashki on the Ingushetia-Chechnya border. As a result, 15,500 new arrivals were registered in Ingushetia, joining the 40,000 people already being sheltered in various community centers and private housing. UNHCR staff working out of the field offices in Vladikavkaz and Nazran — and operating in close coordination with WFP, the ICRC and various non-governmental organizations who could no longer operate in Chechnya — distributed a large amount of food and non-food items, including electric hot plates, blankets and mattresses. Most of the affected population were women and children; many had been severely traumatized by the fighting, which was taking place in the midst of the cruel North Caucasus winter.

But by July 1996, intensive fighting had resumed, with separatist forces becoming heavily engaged with federal troops for control over Grozny. Major fighting in the city streets was accompanied by ultimatums for the civilian population to leave the city. Some 150,000 persons fled Grozny within a matter of days. The vast majority remained with families and friends on the outskirts of Grozny, or in neighboring villages, waiting to see what would occur. A relatively small proportion travelled by car, by bus and on foot to Ingushetia or other outlying areas for greater safety. During this period some 17,500 persons arrived in Ingushetia, 3,000 in Daghestan and 1,000 in North Ossetia, all areas where UNHCR teams were operating. Contingency plans swung into action. Within three days, UNHCR had chartered a cargo plane to airlift urgently needed relief supplies from warehouses in Belgium. The World Food Program also airlifted food rations while the International Committee of the Red Cross brought in a fully equipped field hospital for use in Chechnya.

At the end of August a new cease-fire agreement was signed with the Chechen leadership, which became known as a the Khasavyurt Agreement. The following cease-fire seemed to have real hope of holding, with a firm commitment on both sides to withdrawal of forces, and monitoring through joint patrols. A Joint Commission was established to oversee the administration of Chechnya until a new government could be agreed upon.

At the time of writing the cease-fire negotiated in Khasavyurt is still holding. Still, the situation remains fragile, and many people do not want to return home. UNHCR teams stress that any returns must be voluntary. "UNHCR should not decide

In Daghestan, IDPs from Chechnya register to receive winter jackets purchased by UNHCR with a $500,000 donation from Saudi Arabia.

for the refugees and the IDPs on the solution to their problems, but should rather help them to implement the solutions that they require," Vincent Cochetel, Head of the UNHCR Sub Office in Vladikavkaz, explained. "It should also be clearly kept in mind that many displaced persons have experienced such trauma that they are not likely to return to their former place of residence. You can see the suffering etched on their faces. Assistance will have to be provided even if return movements do not take place in optimal circumstances."

UNHCR assistance throughout the Chechnya emergency has concentrated on community-based activities and the rehabilitation of social infrastructure — measures aimed at benefiting both the internally displaced and the local communities that give them shelter. Distribution of emergency relief supplies — including food parcels donated by Saudi Arabia — has been limited to the most vulnerable.

Now, with the apparent cessation of hostilities in Chechnya, the agency is in addition beginning to focus more attention on facilitating voluntary return to Chechnya. Work has begun on the small-scale repair of communal facilities in some of the border villages within Chechnya, although it is expected that most of the current population will remain where they are during the 1996-1997 winter.

In Daghestan, said Larry Hollingworth, head of the UNHCR field office in Makhachkala, "There are two pillars in the program. The first is to support the displaced living in Daghestan. The second is to assist in the creation of an environment within Chechnya which can encourage the displaced to return to their home areas there. Already, UNHCR has refurbished three village schools, a village clinic, and, in the city of Gudermes, a maternity clinic. It is hoped that the repair of such facilities will encourage and assist the decision to return should the current climate of peace continue."

In view of the history of the conflict in Chechnya, and the fact that the underlying political issues have not yet been addressed, it is difficult to predict the future with any degree of certainty. A United Nations inter-agency mission visited the North Caucasus region in October 1996 to review the current program and to make recommendations for the coming year. The extent of the U.N.'s involvement will depend on the outcome of this mission. Whatever recommendations emerge, UNHCR will clearly have to remain in the area for most of 1997, assisting some to return and others to integrate where they are.

Following the brutal killing of six international Red Cross staff on 17 December in a hospital in Chechnya, UNHCR has put on hold its programs for the delivery of assistance inside the country. However, its operations in the neighboring republics will continue. "This incident will dramatically affect prospects for bringing badly needed humanitarian relief to this war torn society," said UNHCR High Commissioner Sadako Ogata in a message of condolence to the President of the ICRC Cornelio Sommaruga.

As the emergency — hopefully — phases down, UNHCR must also turn its attention to the large numbers of Russian-speaking Chechens in other parts of the Russian Federation. Some are in need; virtually none has received international assistance. A case in point is the situation in Stavropol Krai, which is host to some 56,000 displaced persons from Chechnya. UNHCR recently visited this group and is now preparing to provide some $100,000 in much-needed humanitarian relief. Many of these people may have little chance of returning home, given the current political climate in Chechnya. Others will only be able to return after significant rebuilding. And, most vital of all, the return of Chechnya's exiles will only be possible if there is peace.

**Vera Soboleva**

# Leaving Hong Kong

Two Viet Nam Airlines aircraft stood on the tarmac of Hong Kong's Kai Tak airport on 9 August this year. At their side were buses carrying 310 Vietnamese boat people who had volunteered to return home. UNHCR staff distributed the travel allowance granted to each returnee before leaving Hong Kong. Kai Tak airport had seen this kind of scene many times before in the history of Hong Kong's long (and difficult) relationship with the boat people. But this particular repatriation marked a milestone: the 50,000th voluntary return to Viet Nam.

> Our presence in Viet Nam has convinced many of the boat people to return home.

The honor of being the 50,000th fell on Mr. Nguyen Xuan Dung, who was returning to the northern province of Hai Phong with his family of five. Officials of the Hong Kong government and UNHCR planned to mark the occasion with a small ceremony and gifts for the Dung family, when a commotion broke out. A man had been seen scaling the airport fence, we were told. Sure enough, Hong Kong Immigration officials confirmed that one of the Vietnamese had jumped out of the window of his bus, scaled the airport fence and fled.

Perhaps inevitably, the "escape" of one person provided more drama for the press than the voluntary return of the 50,000th boat person from Hong Kong. Naturally enough, journalists — who heard of the incident over police radio — wanted to know "why a volunteer would escape." The incident illustrates the complexities surrounding UNHCR's work with the Vietnamese boat people still remaining in Hong Kong — work which has been changing and evolving as the implementation of the Comprehensive Plan of Action (CPA, the international agreement on the boat people issue) has progressed.

When the boat people first began arriving in Hong Kong in large numbers, resettlement countries had pledged to take them all, and UNHCR was responsible for arranging their resettlement. After screening was instituted and the Hong Kong government began placing asylum-seekers in detention centers, UNHCR focused its energies on monitoring the screening procedures, providing legal advice to asylum-seekers and ensuring that appropriate services were provided in the camps.

In keeping with the CPA, UNHCR gradually began voluntary repatriation counselling. For the last two years this has been a major focus of our work in Hong Kong. Some outsiders, however, have seen the change in our role in the territory as a contradiction of our mandate.

Still, the return of Mr. Dung and his family, who had lived in detention centers for seven years, gave UNHCR staff a sense of achievement. Two of the Dung children had been born in detention, and they would now be able to live fuller lives not constrained by wire fences. The last time we had felt this pleased — prematurely, it turned out — was in May 1995, when more than 1,000 families were individually informed that they were cleared for return by the Vietnamese government.

UNHCR encouraged these people to take the decision that would get their families out of the camps and into new lives. After a week of counselling, more than 800 people applied for voluntary repatriation, and we began to foresee the closure of the detention centers.

Our hopes for a quick resolution of the problem were soon dashed. Within a few days rumors and events outside our control led to almost all of these people withdrawing from the voluntary repatriation program, and the detention center population remained almost static for the rest of 1995. In Hong Kong, the CPA Steering Committee's time frame for the return of the last boat person in the region — June 1996 for the closure of camps in South East Asian countries, with Hong Kong to follow soon after — seemed unachievable.

But things are again looking up. In the see-saw manner of our work in Hong Kong, 1996 has seen a marked surge in the number of Vietnamese returning home under UNHCR auspices. More than 1,000 people came forward for voluntary repatriation in the last week of October alone. By the end of the year, the total population in the two detention centers for Vietnamese non-refugees in Hong Kong — Whitehead and High Island — fell to 5,500. It was then decided to transport these people to High Island and to close Whitehead on 3 January 1997, except for the two holding centers for those awaiting voluntary repatriation. That's still a large number, but those of us who have seen Whitehead alone crammed with more than 20,000 people can now see the light at the end of the tunnel.

More than 105,000 Vietnamese have returned to Viet Nam from detention centers in the region so far. What can they look forward to back home?

Economic difficulties are the overriding concern of most returnees. Reports from our offices in Viet

Nam indicate that returnees who did not choose to volunteer and were repatriated under the Hong Kong government's Orderly Return Program are sorry they did not avail of the extra financial assistance available to volunteers. I was recently told by a monitoring officer in Hanoi that he had to witness the embarrassing spectacle of a young man being upbraided by his mother for not returning voluntarily and thereby denying himself the assistance.

What the returnees are assured of, however, is their safety. Under UNHCR's understanding with the government of Viet Nam, all the 100,000 returnees from camps in the region and those still to return benefit from an amnesty for their illegal departure from the country. The agreement stipulates that UNHCR staff are able to visit returnees in their homes to monitor the conditions of return. We have been satisfied that Viet Nam has abided by its agreements on the treatment of returnees.

Indeed, our presence in Viet Nam has convinced many of the boat people to return home, and it plays a big role in our efforts to promote voluntary repatriation in Hong Kong. We know that returnees have access to UNHCR; some have written letters to family members still in Hong Kong saying they were surprised by how easy it was to visit our office in Hanoi!

Since the beginning of this year, UNHCR has not been present in the camps on a daily basis. Our efforts are now concentrated in the voluntary repatriation centers at the Whitehead camp, from where field staff are dispatched elsewhere as needed. The Hong Kong government has taken on greater responsibilities in the task of counselling the camp population to return home voluntarily. And as we near the end of the year, the rise in applications for voluntary return makes us feel a resolution of the boat people problem in Hong Kong is not too distant.

Things do not look so good for the refugees who arrived before June 1988, when screening was instituted by the government, and who nonetheless failed to find resettlement in third countries.

While the detention centers for non-refugees in Hong Kong are run by the Hong Kong government, UNHCR manages the only remaining open refugee camp, Pillar Point. You reach "PP" after a long drive through a semi-industrial part of Hong Kong's New Territories, passing what will be Asia's longest suspension 'bridge connecting the colony's new airport to the Kowloon peninsula. The airport site provides our refugees with most of their employment (*continues on p. 30*) ▶

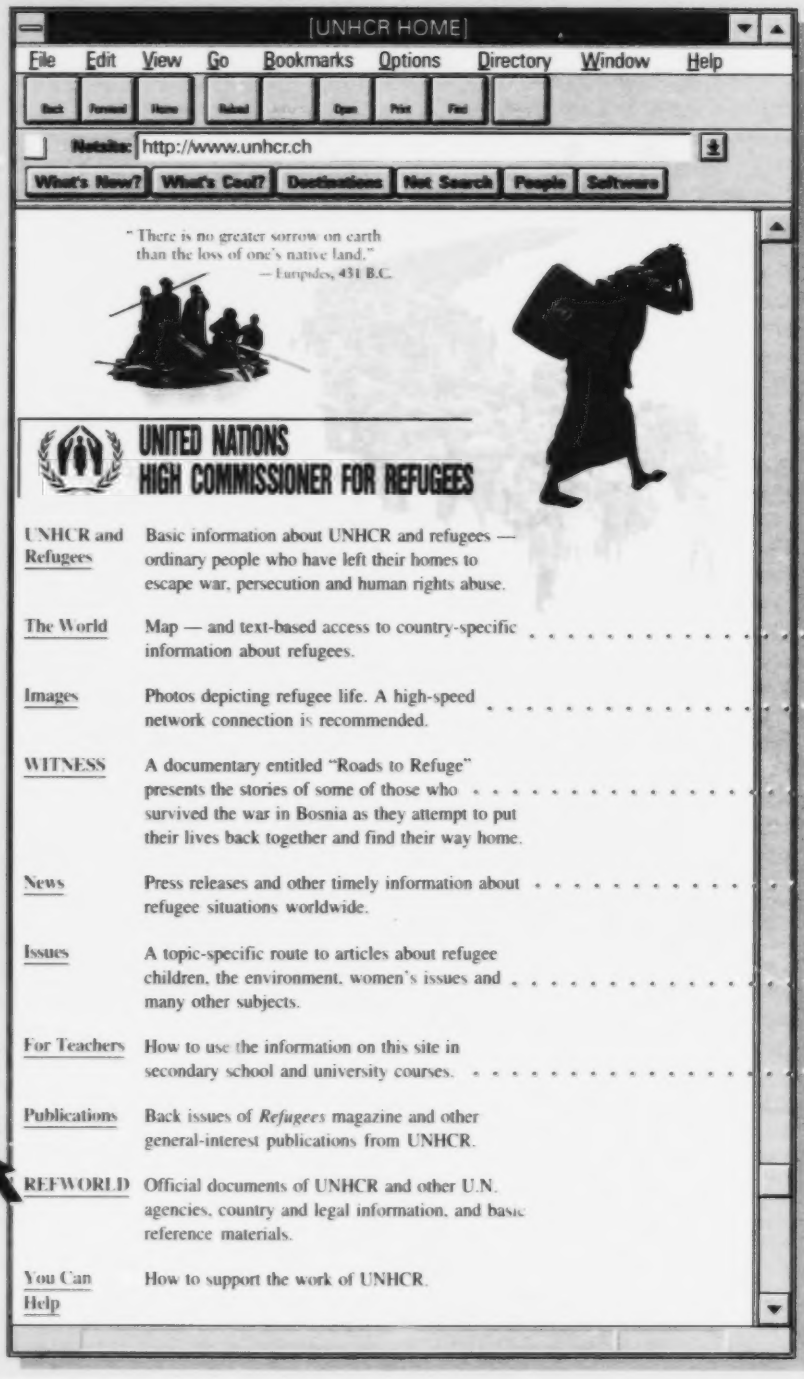
UNHCR Spins a WEB

The new UNHCR Web site on the Internet

# www.unhcr.ch

is probably one of the world's most richly stocked free information resources on refugee issues. It is available to anyone with a computer and an Internet connection, and is regularly updated (twice a week or more, for the NEWS section).

A FRENCH VERSION OF THE SITE WILL BE AVAILABLE IN EARLY 1997.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UNHCR and Refugees
Basic information about UNHCR and refugees — ordinary people who have left their homes to escape war, persecution and human rights abuse.
The World
Map — and text-based access to country-specific information about refugees.
Images
Photos depicting refugee life. A high-speed network connection is recommended.
WITNESS
A documentary entitled "Roads to Refuge" presents the stories of some of those who survived the war in Bosnia as they attempt to put their lives back together and find their way home.
News
Press releases and other timely information about refugee situations worldwide.
Issues
A topic-specific route to articles about refugee children, the environment, women's issues and many other subjects.
For Teachers
How to use the information on this site in secondary school and university courses.
Publications
Back issues of Refugees magazine and other general-interest publications from UNHCR.
REFWORLD
Official documents of UNHCR and other U.N. agencies, country and legal information, and basic reference materials.
You Can Help
How to support the work of UNHCR.

UNHCR's CD-Rom, **REFWORLD**, is a densely packed resource for everything from latest country reports to reports of the UN Commission on Human Rights. A search function can identify relevant documents on statelessness, detention or temporary refuge.

"There are many ways **You Can Help** refugees and the people who work on their behalf. The first step is to understand that refugees are not a threat. They are themselves threatened, and they need help and protection. Refugees are ordinary people who could well be an asset to your community..." *Donate. Or advocate. A how-to text.*

## THE WORLD

Click a region on the map to reach country-specific information about refugees, or click here for a text-only list of countries.

## Images

Users with high-speed connections can access an intriguing and poignant collection of photographs from our photo library, one of the largest in the UN system.

## WITNESS

An award winning inter-active journalism with QuickTime Virtual Reality photography. The first of its series, "Roads to Refuge" tells the story as it happened and as experienced by people in Bosnia. Enter the shell-struck home in Mostar, pan around 360 degrees and you would think you are standing in the middle of debris. Coming soon: "Return to Mali."

Click on grid map for area map (150K)

## News

Features press releases, briefing notes from twice-weekly press conferences by spokespeople in Geneva, and the Bosnia Repatriation Reports: detailed analyses of the security of villages across Bosnia, in English, German or Bosnian/Serbian/Croatian, with extraordinary maps.

## Issues

"Wherever they arise in the world, situations that produce refugees often have common causes and effects, and the refugees themselves have common problems and needs." — *A collection of topic-specific articles in Refugees magazine.*

## For Teachers

"Refugee themes can help children understand fundamental issues in history, geography or education for citizenship; and they can bring an unexpectedly poignant and imaginative approach to teaching of language, literature or art." — *Teaching aids for integrating refugee issues into secondary classes.*

## WEB MASTER

A human lies within. Click to e-mail for technical help, or more information.

▶ (continues from p. 27) opportunities.

Despite the resources UNHCR has committed to this camp — the daily presence of a field officer, primary and secondary education, a clinic run by Médecins Sans Frontières and other social services, visitors usually notice the tension on first entering the camp gates.

There are tough Gurkha guards at the gate to check identity cards. They have been placed there by UNHCR at a very high cost to deter drug trafficking and other gang activities inside the camp. The majority of the remaining 1,200 refugees in Hong Kong are not wanted by resettlement countries because they have criminal records or a history of drug addiction. Hong Kong does not want them either, so most of them are in a state of limbo. Viet Nam, however, expects that these refugees should be resettled.

Although most of these people are uncertain about remaining in Hong Kong after 1997, they also know that they can continue to make better living working on construction sites in Hong Kong than they would back in Viet Nam. A few (mostly the elderly) have applied to UNHCR for assistance to return to Viet Nam and have been accepted by Hanoi on humanitarian grounds. But finding a solution for the majority of the unresettleable refugees — and those non-refugees who have not been accepted for return to Viet Nam — will be our major challenge as we try to close the book on the Vietnamese boat people saga.

Will we manage to do it before Hong Kong reverts to Chinese sovereignty by the middle of next year? Will we at that time be able to end an association with the territory that began with our setting up an office to assist White Russians coming from China in 1952? We hope so, as the intractable nature of this problem has overshadowed our other achievements, just as the escape of one voluntary returnee who would prefer, nonetheless, to be an immigrant overshadows the return of 50,000 volunteers. UNHCR's success in resettling almost three-fourths of the total of some 200,000 Vietnamese who have arrived in Hong Kong since 1975 is one of the most successful and dramatic resettlement efforts ever made in UNHCR's history. And the closure of the CPA this year has similarly marked the end of one of UNHCR's most impressive programs of solution.

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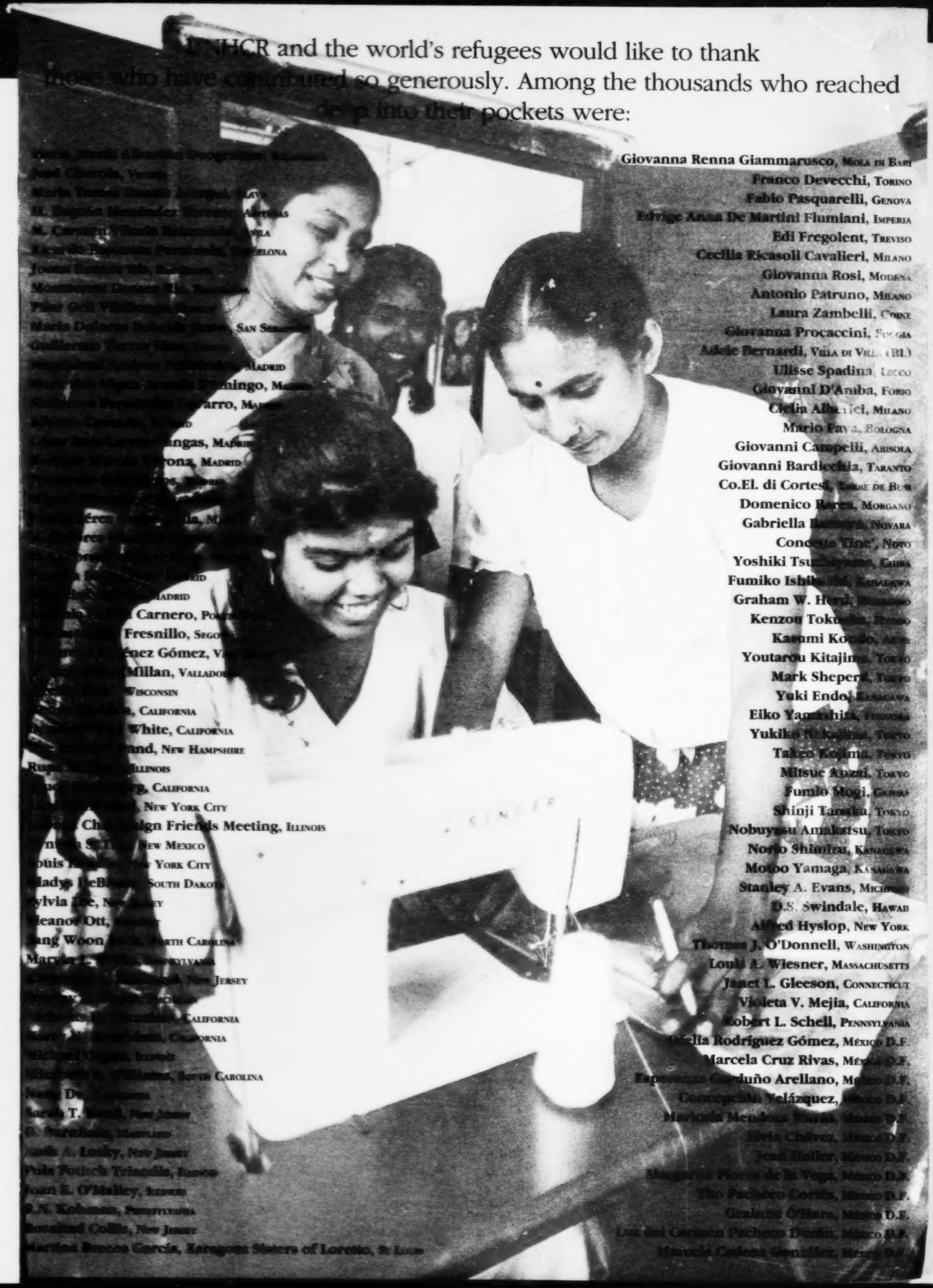

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Africa has too many refugees, more than 5 million of them. Ordinary people, just like you and me, except that conflict and hate have robbed them of their homes, their land, their possessions and their loved ones.

Many have nothing left but their dignity.

But fortunately for them, Africa also has more than its share of warmth and kindness. Here every man is a brother. Every woman, a sister. Every hungry traveller is made welcome. And every motherless child is our child.

It's a deep tradition that cuts across our many ethnic differences, and one for which UNHCR and Africa's innocent outcasts are profoundly grateful.

Because without your tolerance we couldn't carry on sheltering and protecting the refugees under our care.

So until the day comes when they can return to their homes, let's not forget that the refugees among us are still part of our family.

The human family.

Thank you.

UNHCR

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

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